



This Is **IT**

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Building an Awesome Member Website

Member organizations (MOs) have unique challenges when it comes to building a Website. More than any other type of business, member organizations need to create a dynamic Website that draws members in for frequent visits. Most member organizations run a large number of events throughout the year, have limited financial and administrative resources, have limited IT resources, and rely on membership participation and revenue to grow and survive. Finally, MOs can have difficulty attracting young, computer-savvy members.

A creative and well-managed Website can help in accomplish these goals, both on- and off-line. The key to creating such a site is placing your Website under a content management system. Content management allows the design and layout of the site to be defined by web professionals, and all of the actual content of the site to be managed by the MO. This allows the staff of the MO to maintain their site with minimal IT resources (even volunteer members), and no additional fees beyond normal hosting fees to web development professionals once the site is up and running.

“Since implementing an updated, well-designed, content managed Website, our membership has increased 14% in six months and we’ve retained 95% of our existing members, while our total cost of ownership has gone down,” says Aaron Hilger, president of Rochester Builders Exchange (www.robex.com), who recently rebuilt his MO site in a content management platform.

To draw people into your site from search engines, your content should be updated frequently. This both enhances your ranking and creates the impression among prospective and current members that you have an active and professional organization. Be sure that as part of creating your site you have your organization’s name, address, phone, and contact information on every page. This ensures that your content is indexed along with your organization for localized searches. The easier it is to update your content, the more likely it is that it will be done.

Most MOs have frequent events such as member meetings, fundraisers, and networking events. It’s essential that these events be listed and up-to-date—and that members and non-members be able to sign up and pay for these events online. Keeping old events on your Website may lead to the impression that you don’t update it or that your organization isn’t very active.

Additional features that MOs may wish to have on their site include the ability to place desired member materials behind a member sign-up on the Website (such as meeting minutes, member lists, etc.), an interactive forum to encourage member discussions, frequent updates on the status of the organization from the president or board members, and an “in the news” section that details important events in the operation of the organization.

Content management platforms allow you to edit your text, upload files and images, and create forms and complex capabilities such as a calendar system—all without programming or needing to know HTML. In addition, good content management platforms will allow you to “reskin” or change the design of your site without modifying, re-entering, or rede-

ploying your content. This allows you to change your design frequently, keeping your site up-to-date and current, without rebuilding it every few years.

One platform that an MO might consider for deploying such a Website is Dot Net Nuke (www.dotnetnuke.com). This free Microsoft .NET/Microsoft SQL Server-based Web development tool can easily handle the requirements above, and you can purchase modules to handle more advanced requirements for much less than a custom-built feature in a Website. You will probably need to employ a professional Web development organization to help you initially build the site and the “skin,” or look and feel, of the site. But once the site is deployed you’ll quickly recover your initial investment by being able to do all your own updates without needing to employ a professional Web developer for content changes or additions.

Other free content management systems include:

- PHPNuke (www.phpnuke.org)
- Drupal (www.drupal.org)
- Joomla (www.joomla.org)—all similar platforms that run on Linux and MySQL.

Converting your member organization to a content management platform will save you money, enhance your Website’s utility to your members, improve your reputation among current and prospective members, and lower your administrative costs.

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